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Reagan Denies Making Deal With Iran For Release of U.S. Hostages in Lebanon

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WASHINGTON—President Reagan vehemently denied that he struck a deal with terrorists for the release of U.S. hostages and claimed that his secret funneling of military parts to Iran was both legal and in the national interest.

But the president publicly conceded for the first time that, as part of an undisclosed switch in policy, he authorized secret shipments of "defensive weapons and spare parts to Iran," and that he sent former national security adviser Robert McFarlane to Tehran to open a channel of communications with Iranian leaders.

Moreover, Mr. Reagan said that although the overtures to Iran were part of a broad policy meant to improve U.S. relations with that strategic nation, one objective also was to "effect the safe return of all hostages."

Blames the Press

The president, striking an unusually defensive pose during a nationally televised speech, blamed the press for forcing him to go public with his previously secret operation.

"So extensive have been the false rumors and erroneous reports that the risks of remaining silent now exceed the risks of speaking out," he declared. "That is why I decided to address you tonight."

News accounts during the past 10 days have chronicled the administration's efforts and have suggested that they were designed, at least in part, to coax Iranian leaders to prevail upon the terrorist group believed to hold U.S. hostages in Lebanon. The efforts were made despite the official U.S. arms embargo against Iran and the administration's vow that it won't deal with terrorists.

Mr. Reagan insisted, however, that "the United States has not made concessions to those who hold our people captive in Lebanon. And we will not." Mr. Reagan denied that he had circumvented legal requirements for congressional oversight, or had sidestepped such senior advisers as Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and Secretary of State George Shultz, in conducting the covert policy toward Iran.

"All appropriate cabinet officers were fully consulted," he insisted. "The actions I authorized were in full compliance with the federal law—and the relevant committees of Congress are being, and will be, fully informed."

But the president didn't address technical legal issues that still are far from being settled—including whether he was required to inform congressional leaders of his activities before undertaking them, rather than only now after they had been disclosed in news accounts.

Comparing his secret actions to former President Nixon's 1971 overtures to China, Mr. Reagan asserted that his true objectives were to improve relations with Iran, a country he described as having vast strategic importance because of its oil reserves, its proximity to the Soviet Union, and its influence in the Islamic world.

The president added that his secret efforts were designed to help bring an end to the six-year Iran-Iraq war. He maintained, however, that the U.S. continues to remain neutral in that conflict.

The president minimized the arms shipments, calling them "modest deliveries, (which) taken together could easily fit into a single cargo plane." He insisted the arms couldn't "affect the outcome" of the Iran-Iraq hostilities.

The president didn't mention the role reportedly played by Israel, which the administration concedes transferred additional U.S.-made arms to Iran, with Washington's approval, in September 1985. Nor did he mention the U.S. arms embargo against Iran and other nations that the U.S. has declared are sponsors of terrorism.

Mr. Reagan conceded that "bitter and enduring disagreements persist" between the U.S. and Iran, but he suggested that his diplomatic overtures already had borne some results. "Since the U.S. government contact began with Iran, there has been no evidence of Iranian complicity in acts of terrorism against the United States," he asserted.

Three Freed, Three Abducted

He also noted that three U.S. hostages had been released, but he didn't mention that three more had been abducted during the period.

Some have suggested that the U.S. has been deceived by the Iranians, who have taken the U.S. arms but have failed to deliver all the hostages. But a senior administration official said the fact that hostages remain in captivity merely demonstrates that the Iranian factions "we have been dealing with don't have total control over the captors."

The president's speech didn't appear likely to quiet growing congressional criticism of Mr. Reagan's policy.

Vermont Sen. Patrick Leahy, ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, complained that the White House's failure to notify Congress of its Iranian contacts suggested that the administration was "more willing to trust the factions in Iran than they were to trust the Republican and Democratic leadership in Congress."

Rep. Richard Cheney (R., Wyo.), however, said the president "deserves our support, not Monday-morning quarterbacking." He argued that Mr. Reagan's dealings with Iran were "in the long-range interest of the United States."

Sen. Robert Byrd (D, W.Va.), who will be the Senate majority leader in January, was especially critical. Calling the Iran mission a "major foreign-policy blunder," he said the speech was "a public-relations game."

Saeed Rajai-Khorasani, Iran's ambassador to the United Nations, called Mr. Reagan's speech "a very optimistic statement and a very constructive statement."